

Neeta Das

Hapí pant meets Asfu Dadu

For Dhruv, Pulkit & Divij; the Hapí pants of my family

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I am an eight year old boy. I do not have any parents. For as long as I remember I have lived in this chai shop at the Bara Imambara. Kaka, that is Munna Lal, the owner lets me sleep here in the shop. In return for his kindness I sweep his shop and wash the dishes. I also serve chai to the tourists who come to visit the Imambara. They all lovingly call me Hapí pant because of the half pants I keep wearing.

Lots of people come to see the Imambara. I know it was built by a Nawab Asaf-ud-daula, a very kind king of Lucknow. I often sit on the stone bench outside the Imambara and think about him. One day while sitting there I dozed off into a deep slumber and started dreaming. I dreamt that I was sitting on that bench as usual when a very old man, dressed up in a quaint costume of colored silk, wearing lots of jewellery of studded stones and pearls, came and sat down besides me. He looked very tired.

Who are you? I asked him with surprise on my face, And why are you looking so tired?

The old man looked up to see a wild looking creature with a mass of untidy black curls, a face as brown as a berry, and very few clothes on his body. He simply wore a pair of shorts and a red shirt. His legs were brown and bare. He had bright eyes and a big grin on his face.

I am Nawab Asaf-ud-daula, and you? the old man replied.

I am Hapí pant. I answered, still curious. Why are you here? Did you not die long, long, back?

Yes, I did. But I wanted to see the city I had made two hundred back. However, in these two hundred years the city

has changed so much. I could not recognize anything and got lost. Suddenly I saw this Imambara and so sat down to rest. The Nawab said.

Sir, may I call you Asfu Dadu? I asked the old man.

Sure, he said.

Now Dadu, I told him, you just sit down and relax. I will get you some cold water and a refreshing cup of tea. Saying that I took off to get the glass of water and chai. When I returned I saw Dadu looking around in wonder.



You know son, in my days we had horses, elephants, and palakis for going from one place to another. I don't see them anywhere. Instead you have these smoke belching things that make so much noise. Dadu commented.

Oh! The small two wheelers are called scooters and motorcycles while the four wheelers are buses and cars. I explained. And Dadu, please drink your tea before it gets cold.

Thank you, said Dadu. You have been very kind and helpful. After finishing my tea will you guide me to some of the places I had made?

Oh! Sure Dadu. I said gleefully. Just let me go and take permission from Kaka. Saying that I ran off to ask Kaka for a day off. Kaka nodded his head in agreement and I ran back to Dadu.

Let's go Dadu, I said. Where do we start from?

Well let me see, said Dadu thinking. My first palace complex Macchi Bhawan, would be a good place to start.

How does one find the place Dadu? I asked.

Macchi Bhawan is located on the highest point of Lucknow and is near this Imambara. It also has a mosque built by Aurangzeb on the Lakshman Tila nearby. Dadu answered.

Yes, Yes, I know the place, it is called Alamgir mosque. I said excitedly.

Aurangzeb was also called Alamgir, Dadu informed me as we started moving. The mosque is a small climb from the Bara Imambara. When we reached the top Dadu looked around and exclaimed in surprise, The palace has

disappeared! It stood within its fortified walls just there. This is most astonishing. Dadu said pointing to a mound on the opposite side with his back to the mosque.



‘I haven’t seen anything there since my birth,’ I replied. ‘Let’s ask somebody.’

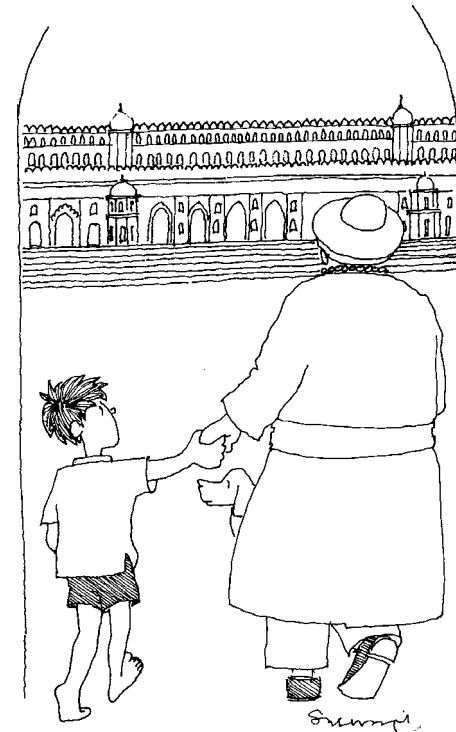
So we approached a group of men sitting on the lawns below the mosque.

‘Excuse me gentlemen,’ said Dadu, ‘What happened to the Macchi Bhawan?’ The men looked at us in surprise and then burst out laughing. ‘In that fancy dress the old man probably

thinks he is a Nawab and probably stayed there too!’ One of them joked.

‘Well, he is a Nawab and he did stay there!’ I countered angrily and took Dadu away from the group of mean men. ‘Let’s ask someone else.’

We climbed up the steps of the mosque and approached an old maulvi with a long white beard. We asked him the same question.



‘Ah! The British during the First War of Independence demolished the Macchi Bhawan fort and palace in 1857.’ The maulvi said.

“But why? We had no differences with the British,” Dadu said.
“The British wanted to take over Lucknow. However, we fought them bravely but lost.” The old man replied. “They broke down many beautiful palaces and buildings of Lucknow because they were scared the Nawab would use these as army posts. The British, however, spared the Imambaras.”

I had no idea what the two were talking about so I just waited for Dadu. He seemed quite perturbed to hear all this. After looking around for some time he thanked the maulvi who added, “The King George’s Medical College was made in place of the old fort-palace. That is the building you see there today.”

We slowly made our way down to the Imambara, my small hand holding Dadu’s big one, and guiding him along the rough patches.

“Why don’t we see the Imambara?” I asked Dadu hoping this would cheer him up.

“All right son,” Dadu replied and we made our way through the traffic and entered the large gates.

We came to the garden full of bright colored flowers. Dadu seemed pleased to see that his Imambara was well kept. We climbed the wide steps and came to the main court of the Imambara.

“Dadu do you know this Imambara is called Asfi Imambara after you?” I said. “It is also called Bhul Bhulaiya. People say it was made as a place for you to hide from the enemy.”

“Is that so?” Dadu looked surprised and laughed. “But I had no enemy!”

We walked to the Imambara past the mosque on the right.

“Dadu, what is an Imambara?” I asked.

“Imambara is a place where we remember our Imams, our spiritual leaders, specifically the third Imam, Hossein, and his battle at Kerbala and houses the tazia.” Dadu answered.

“I don’t quite understand but I like the place anyway. But I’ll show you what I like best in this complex.” Saying that I pulled Dadu towards the left and climbed a short flight of steps.

“Dadu, see this place is so exciting. It has bats, and tadpoles, and fishes. I come here with my friends everyday to play. We play hide and seek, throw stones in the water and hear the sound, and sometimes catch fishes and tadpoles in a bottle.” I informed Dadu.

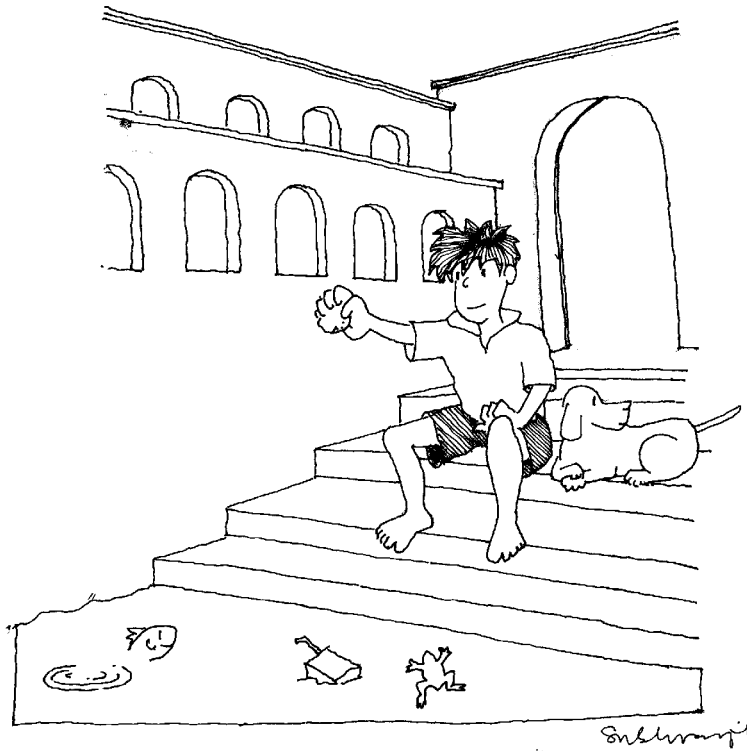
Dadu looked at me questioningly, wondering what I was talking about. On reaching there he exclaimed, “This is the Baoli! It is a step well. It is older than me you know. It was made by the Sheikhs who used it to draw water for their use.”

“But Dadu, a well is round from which you pull out water with a rope and a bucket,” I asked.

“Yes, this well is special. Here instead of pulling the water you can go down the steps and reach the water. You can carry this water in pots. The well was also used as my summer palace. Most of this building is below the ground. That keeps it cool like a basement. The water further makes it cooler.” Dadu said.

“Today we have fans, coolers, and air conditioner’s to keep us cool.” I informed Dadu.

“Oh! We had fans too. They were large pieces of cloth hanging from the ceiling. Two people would move it to and fro.” Dadu said.



We went down the steps towards the water. 'Hapí pant, promise me you will not throw any more stones or garbage in this water.' Dadu said to me. By the look on his face I knew Dadu was not liking the dirty water so I hastily promised. I did not tell Dadu that tourists also threw empty popcorn plastic bags and cans in it too!

We walked out of the Baoli, past the Imambara. Dadu seemed a little tired from walking so much.

'Dadu, do you want to rest awhile at the chai shop?' I asked.

'Yes, that would be a good idea.' Dadu replied. So we walked

to Kakaís shop outside the Imambara.

'Let me get you something to drink,' I suggested.

'I won't mind a sherbet,' Dadu replied. So I quickly ran to the shop and got two cola bottles.

'Here Dadu, have this,' I said. Dadu looked at the black bottle suspiciously.

'What is this,' he asked.

'It's a cola,' I said, 'My favorite sherbet. Try it.'

Dadu put the bottle to his lips and took a few sips. He had a puzzled expression on his face, which greatly amused me.

'Sherbet never tasted like this in my time,' he said. He drank it nevertheless. I sat contentedly next to him and had my cola. It was nearing noon now.

'Where to now Dadu?' I asked.

'I wanted to buy a pair of shoes for myself,' Dadu said, 'These have worn out with so much walking.'

'We could go to the Chowk market then,' I suggested. 'We could also eat our lunch there. But we can't walk there. We will have to take a rickshaw.' Saying this I collected the empty cola bottles and went off to return them and hail a cycle rickshaw. After much bargaining I got one for ten rupees. I climbed on to it and asked him to drive towards Dadu.

'Come on Dadu, let's go,' I said. Dadu looked uneasy but at my insistence he climbed on to the rickshaw with great difficulty, his flowing robes coming in the way. We drove off with Dadu holding on tight to the side of the rickshaw.



As we went Dadu told me stories of his time in Lucknow. He also told me that Chowk was the oldest part of Lucknow. It was the best market during his time. One could get anything there from food to flowers. I listened to Dadu with rapt attention, so much so that I did not realize the rickshaw had stopped.

‘Babuji, we have reached Thandi Sarak,’ the rickshaw puller said. ‘Give me my money.’

Dadu looked worried, ‘I don’t have any money,’ he said.

‘I’ll do,’ I said taking out money from my pocket. ‘The tourists tip me for running small errands for them. I am collecting

this money to buy a TV for myself.’

‘A TV?’ Dadu asked getting down from the rickshaw.

‘Babuji, I am getting late,’ the rickshaw puller said impatiently. So I hurriedly got off the rickshaw gave him the money. We walked towards the Gol Darwaza and as I described the TV to Dadu he looked around trying to remember it as it was in earlier times.



‘This place has changed so much,’ Dadu said. ‘People did not throw garbage on the streets and the gutters were clean! Even the goods in the shops has changed.’

We looked around for shoe shops but Dadu could not see anything that he could buy. He was however very fascinated by a TV in one of the shops.

‘What is that?’ he asked.

‘That is a television, the TV I was telling you about,’ I answered. ‘It has many entertaining programs on it.’

‘We had nautches, animal fights, and nautankis during our times for entertainment,’ Dadu informed me.

‘What is this nice smell coming,’ I said. ‘Oh! It is Tunde Kababi, my favorite food shop.’ I had also started to get hungry by now. ‘Could we eat?’

‘Sure,’ said Dadu. So we went to the shop and ordered some kababs and parathas. The shop keeper gave us some on a large leaf. Dadu was quite intrigued by the looks of the food and the platter.

‘You know son, I used to be served food on a big silver plate with many types of kababs and other items. Our chefs were world famous for their cuisine,’ Dadu said wistfully.

I felt sorry having to treat a king so shabbily but there was little I could do. Probably reading my thoughts the Nawab added, ‘This is very good too, Hapí pant!’

We eat slowly, standing near the shop, and chatted. He told me about the old chowk and I talked about the cartoon network on TV.

‘Where do we go from here?’ I asked Dadu, finishing off my food.

‘I would like to go to my palace complex, the Daulat Khana,’ Dadu answered.



So we walked to the end of the street and crossed a large gate.

‘Why, this is the Akbari Darwaza,’ Dadu exclaimed. ‘It was built by Qazi Mahmud Bilgrami, deputy of the *subedar* of Jawahar Khan of Awadh to commemorate the visit of Akbar. It has changed a lot and is in a pretty bad shape. But this is one of the oldest monuments of Lucknow, built even before my times.’

We looked at the gate for a few minutes and moved out of the street of chowk onto the main road and hailed a rickshaw for Daulat Khana. As we moved towards the palace complex

Dadu told me about his palace complex. He said it was enclosed by a high wall with bastions on the four corners and contained several buildings, gardens, and tanks. On entering the south gate one would find Asafi kothi or Golghar, so called because of the round shape of its front veranda. There was also an Imambara, mosque, living quarters of the Nawab, baradaris and gardens. Hearing all this I was very excited about seeing the palace complex. On reaching there all I found was an open land with scattered and ruined buildings.

‘Where do we go now?’ I asked Dadu. But Dadu seemed totally lost. So we both wandered around. I pointed to the Satkhanda Palace nearby. But Dadu did not seem to know anything about it. We saw a clock tower and a red building which people informed us was the Baradari. We ventured deeper into the area and saw the ruins of an old water tank.

‘Look Dadu, that’s the Golghar,’ I said pointing to a building which resembled the Asafi kothi. But by now it had altered completely except for the circular veranda. But I could see Dadu’s attention was not with me anymore. He was shocked to see the ruins and squalor around the palace that he had so lovingly built. There was little that could resurrect his fond memories.

‘Enough, son!’ He said, holding his heart with both his hands, a pained expression on his face. ‘I can see no more.’ Saying this Dadu stumbled towards a nearby rock. I hastily stepped forward to assist him.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked Dadu anxiously.

‘I feel faint. I should not have come back here. I was hoping to see my kingdom, changed but alive. But alas, nobody cares for the old!’ Saying this Dadu slipped and fell on the ground.

‘Dadu! Dadu! Please don’t leave,’ I said, shaking him by the shoulder. But seeing no response I started crying. As I wept I felt someone calling my name and saying, ‘Hapí pant, wake up, it’s nearly dusk.’

I woke up and rubbed my eyes. They were wet and Kaka was standing in front of me. I could remember my dream so vividly. Lost in my thoughts, I slowly walked to the shop to buy myself something to eat. But as I searched for money in my pocket, I found I had none. I then remembered that I had given the last coin to the rickshaw man who had taken us to the Daulat Khana.

